

From Physical Sacrifice to Embodied Resilience: Nichiren's Reinterpretation of the Perfect Offering in the Lotus Sūtra

I. Introduction: The Radicality of the Mahāyāna Offering

A. The Central Paradox of the Lotus Sūtra

The *Lotus Sūtra* (*Myōhō-rence-kyō*), revered in East Asian Buddhism as the definitive teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha, presents a central doctrinal challenge: reconciling the boundless, compassionate promise of universal enlightenment with textual requirements of seemingly impossible asceticism. On one hand, the Sūtra assures all beings—regardless of station, moral standing, or capacity—that they possess the innate potential to attain Buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*).¹ This philosophy emphasizes immanence and accessibility. On the other hand, scriptures like Chapter 23, "The Former Affairs of Medicine-King Bodhisattva," detail acts of transcendent, literal physical dedication that appear to set an absolute standard far beyond the reach of ordinary mortals.

The narrative of Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva (known as Medicine-King Bodhisattva in his later incarnation) details the ultimate offering made to the Buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue.³ This account establishes the highest possible measure of devotion: the dedication of one's own life-entity. The conflict arises when practitioners in the later ages—specifically the degenerate age known as the Latter Day of the Law (

Mappō)—seek to emulate this act. If the attainment of supreme perfect enlightenment requires such an extraordinary, literal sacrifice, the claim of universal accessibility (*sokushin jōbutsu*) becomes untenable.¹

B. Defining the Contradiction: Actuality versus Principle

The classical narrative of Gladly-Seen involves the spectacular, physical immolation of the self.³ This literal sacrifice establishes an absolute standard of dedication that appears impossible for a lay community facing the ordinary challenges of medieval life.⁴ Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282), recognizing the need to bridge this gap for practitioners in

Mappō, established a critical doctrinal distinction between *offering in actuality* (the literal, physical sacrifice of the ancient Bodhisattvas) and *offering in principle*.⁴

Nichiren's unique insight lay in translating the transcendent physical act into an immanent, practical discipline.⁴ This transformative shift is encapsulated by the concept of

shikidoku (reading the Sūtra with the body).⁵

Shikidoku mandates not merely the intellectual study of the text, but the complete immersion of one's lived experience into the Law, particularly the chapters predicting that the votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* would face intense hostility and persecution in the evil age.⁷ This translation of physical suffering into spiritual merit is mandated by the doctrine of the Latter Day of the Law. If the ultimate offering still required literal self-immolation in 13th-century Japan, Nichiren's teaching would only apply to an ascetic elite, thereby nullifying the universal principle of Buddhahood for all beings. A functional equivalent of the "perfect offering" accessible to ordinary lay practitioners was therefore necessary to maintain doctrinal coherence with

sokushin jōbutsu.¹

C. The Scope of Nichiren's Innovation

The core thesis explored in this analysis is that Nichiren's genius involved equating the intense, purifying suffering of persecution (*shikidoku*) with the powerful, universal illumination caused by Gladly-Seen's self-immolation. This reinterpretation fundamentally democratized the highest offering.

Furthermore, Nichiren's formulation integrates concepts derived from earlier esoteric and exoteric traditions.² The description of Gladly-Seen utilizing "supernatural powers"³ hints at an esoteric element. Nichiren integrates the esoteric view of the body as the ultimate vessel

for cosmic truth (

Myōhō)² with the exoteric practice of continuous perseverance, thereby creating a unified path accessible to all. The resulting practice is the embodied realization of the Wonderful Dharma (

Myōhō), wherein a practitioner's persistent dedication and life struggle become the ultimate expression of gratitude and the highest possible offering to the Buddha.

II. The Archetype of Absolute Altruism: Chapter 23 of the Lotus Sūtra

A. The Narrative of Gladly-Seen Bodhisattva (Issai-shujō-kiken)

Chapter 23 serves as a pivotal narrative within the *Lotus Sūtra*, setting the standard for absolute, self-sacrificing devotion. It recounts the former affairs of Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva, who would later be reborn as Medicine-King Bodhisattva.³ Practicing under the guidance of the Buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue, the Bodhisattva initially performed acts of magnificent devotion, employing his supernatural powers to conjure and present "heavenly flowers and precious scents" to the Buddha and the Sūtra itself.³

Despite the grandeur of these conjured gifts, the Bodhisattva experienced a profound realization, recognizing that such external offerings, however vast or miraculous, were ultimately "less valuable than the offering of my own body".³ This moment marks a crucial philosophical turning point: the recognition that the physical self is the ultimate locus of treasure. Since the self is the repository of karma and the potential for Buddhahood¹⁰, the ultimate treasure must be grounded in the entity of life itself, rather than transient, magically created riches. This understanding sets the standard that any true offering requires the dedication of the practitioner's deepest reality—the self.

B. The Doctrine of Self-Immolation (Jātaka Context)

Following this realization, Gladly-Seen embarked upon the practice of self-immolation. He anointed his body with oil and, utilizing transcendental powers, burned himself as an offering of light for twelve hundred years, illuminating the entire universe.³ After his body was consumed, he was reborn and continued to serve the Buddha. Furthermore, after the Buddha's death, Gladly-Seen cremated the Buddha's body, built eighty-four thousand stupas, and, still unsatisfied with his offerings, proceeded to burn his arms for seventy-two thousand years.¹²

This description of physical self-sacrifice in the *Lotus Sūtra* must be understood within the broader context of Mahāyāna narratives, where self-immolation is presented as a heroic, altruistic act aimed at seeking enlightenment.¹³ Scholars note that the ethical justification for such practices relies entirely upon the compassionate motivation of the Bodhisattva, distinguishing it from ordinary nihilistic suicide.¹⁰ The intent is not self-destruction but profound transformation and benefit for all sentient beings.¹⁴ Crucially, when the Bodhisattvas, gods, and other beings converted by Gladly-Seen grieved over the loss of his arms, he declared that having offered his flesh, he would surely attain Buddhahood, whereupon his arms were miraculously restored.¹² This restoration is fundamental; it refutes any nihilistic interpretation of the sacrifice.¹³ The act is thus not annihilation but a powerful transformation, emphasizing that the Mahāyāna goal is to transcend physical form through profound spiritual realization, manifesting the imperishable Dharma-body.³

C. Symbolism of the Offering

The sacrifice of Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva is fundamentally an *illuminative* act. The burning body, which served as the offering, illuminated the "entire universe".³ This illumination symbolizes the light of wisdom,

bodhi, which eradicates the ignorance of the long night of delusion. The act of total dedication functions as an ultimate purification, transforming the physical body from a temporary, defiled aggregation into a cosmic source of spiritual light.¹⁰

The Bodhisattva maintains that he cherishes the body not for its own sake, but only because it serves as the instrument for saving others.¹⁵ By conceptualizing every action and movement—even sitting, lying down, or washing one's hands—as an opportunity to cultivate friendly thoughts for all creatures, the body is converted into a "holy vessel of benediction".¹⁵ The Bodhisattva's rejection of offerings produced by transient supernatural powers, in favor of the

physical reality of the body, establishes the principle that the physical life, when fully

dedicated, possesses the superior karmic weight necessary for supreme enlightenment.

III. The Soteriological Shift: Nichiren's Revaluation of the Immediate Body

A. The Age of Practice: The Latter Day of the Law (Mappō)

Nichiren Daishonin articulated his teachings within the specific theological context of the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappō*), a time characterized by spiritual degeneration, widespread conflict, and the inefficacy of provisional teachings.¹ In this evil world, traditional, miraculous practices based on the classical narrative—including literal physical offerings—are considered ineffective or practically impossible.¹ This perception led Nichiren to assert that a new methodology was required, one that directly accessed the essence of the

Lotus Sūtra.¹⁶

The Sūtra itself predicts the difficulty of believing in its teachings in this turbulent age, stating that even holding faith "for even the space of a moment" will be challenging.⁸ This difficulty necessitates a practical approach to enlightenment that is immediately applicable to the lives of suffering people.

B. The Doctrine of *Sokushin Jōbutsu* (Attaining Buddhahood in This Very Body)

A core philosophical anchor of Nichiren Buddhism, derived from Tendai thought, is *sokushin jōbutsu*, which posits that enlightenment is achieved within the current physical and emotional existence.¹ The physical body is not viewed as a temporary obstruction to be discarded, but as the intrinsically sacred vessel of the Buddha-nature. This teaching emphasizes that the Buddha's Pure Land is immanent in this present world (

shaba soku jikkōdo).²

If the body is intrinsically sacred and capable of becoming the Buddha land, its literal destruction, as practiced by Gladly-Seen, would be counterproductive to realizing its inherent potential in *Mappō*. The necessity of realizing Buddhahood *in this life* provides the philosophical rationale for rejecting literal sacrifice while retaining the *spirit* of absolute devotion. The physical body must be utilized as the instrument of enlightenment, not rejected. The body itself is elevated from a defiled shell to the "Treasure Tower" that symbolizes the individual's life and innate potential.¹¹ If the ultimate reality (

Myōhō) exists in the single thought-moment (*ichinen sanzen*)², then the body that hosts this thought is sacred, meaning its destruction would nullify the vessel required for immediate Buddhahood.

C. Contrasting Offerings: Offering in Actuality vs. Offering in Principle

To guide his followers, Nichiren clearly distinguished between the historical "offering in actuality" and the contemporary "offering in principle".⁴ He noted that the literal sacrifices of past sages, such as Medicine-King Bodhisattva burning his arms or Prince Shōtoku peeling off the skin of his hand to copy the Sūtra, were the "affairs of worthies and sages" and were impossible for ordinary people to emulate.⁴

For the people of the Latter Day of the Law, the ultimate offering shifts from the physical body to the dedication of one's entire life and livelihood to the propagation of the Mystic Law. This "offering in principle" involves giving what sustains or is of value to one's life—time, effort, material provisions, and enduring hardship—all in service of the Dharma.⁴

The ultimate transformation of the offering is illustrated by mapping the key elements of Chapter 23 onto Nichiren’s practical doctrines:

The Transformation of the Ultimate Offering

| Characteristic | Classical Offering (Medicine-King Bodhisattva) | Nichiren’s Offering (<i>Shikidoku</i>) |
|------------------|---|--|
| Location/Context | Remote Past, under Ancient Buddha (Purified Realm) | Latter Day of the Law (<i>Mappō</i>) (Defiled Realm) ¹ |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Material Offered | Physical body/arms, Heavenly flowers, precious scents (Actual Sacrifice) ³ | Present life, dedicated effort, livelihood (Offering in Principle) ⁴ |
| Mechanism of Offering | Physical Self-Immolation, Supernatural Powers, Ascetic Extremism ³ | Enduring Persecution, Opposition, and Life Hardships (Faith) ⁸ |
| Result (Classical) | Universal Illumination, Karmic merit, Restoration of Body, Rebirth ³ | Realization of Buddhahood in the present existence (<i>Sokushin Jōbutsu</i>) ¹ |

IV. *Shikidoku*: Hardship as the Perfect Offering

A. Defining the Embodied Reading of the Sūtra

Shikidoku (Reading with the Body) represents the operational philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism, meaning that practitioners actualize the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra* through their actions and lived experience.⁵ For Nichiren, this was not a theoretical exercise but a profound spiritual experience, equivalent to entering the "very presence of the Buddha in an immediate, experiential, and face-to-face way".⁷ This embodied reading must be applicable to the specific "time, place, and contemporary events" of the practitioner.⁷

The practice of *shikidoku* involves an experiential validation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Since the Sūtra contains specific warnings that its votaries would meet with severe persecution, slander, and difficulty in the evil age, facing these trials with steadfast commitment fulfills the textual prophecy.⁸ By enduring the suffering predicted by the Sūtra, the practitioner's life becomes the physical proof, or the

material evidence, of the Sūtra's veracity.

B. The Prophecies of Persecution and the Votary

Nichiren's life was characterized by numerous hardships, including government persecution, exile, and physical attacks.¹⁸ He viewed these persecutions not as misfortune, but as the fulfillment of the

Lotus Sūtra's predictions, confirming his identity as the votary of the Sūtra in the Latter Day.¹⁹

The suffering endured by Nichiren and his followers served a critical soteriological function: it was the modern replacement for the purifying ritual fire of Gladly-Seen's self-immolation. In Mahāyāna tradition, offerings often serve as purification rites. Nichiren concluded that the unjust suffering and hostility faced by his followers effectively burned away karmic obstacles (*shikidoku*).⁵

A crucial distinction in Nichiren's teaching is that hardship only leads to the attainment of Buddhahood if it is endured *for the sake* of the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁸ Nichiren contrasted the suffering of his disciple Nanjō Tokimitsu, whose difficulties "have occurred because of the Lotus Sutra," with the defeats of powerful historical figures such as Emperor Hui-tsung of China and the Retired Emperor Gotoba of Japan.⁸ While the emperors faced incredible adversity, their hardships were for political or "petty reasons" and were not linked to devotion to the Dharma; consequently, their trials did not guarantee enlightenment.⁸ This differentiation demonstrates that the suffering itself is inert; the transformative value is conferred solely by the unwavering commitment to the Mystic Law within that suffering.

C. Karmic Transformation and the Fire of Faith

The persistent endurance of opposition and unjust fate for the Dharma's sake is considered an act of dedication far surpassing physical danger taken for lesser reasons.⁸ This continuous, living sacrifice made daily through internal resolve replaces the finite, isolated act of physical self-immolation.

Hardships are redefined as "ideal opportunities for transforming our karma" and serve to "lessen karmic retribution".⁵ The practitioner's internal, unwavering resolve to endure slander and persecution becomes the modern equivalent of the thousands of years of the Medicine-King's burning arms. This resolve causes one's faith to "burn brighter," enabling the realization of a life state "as vast as the ocean" and guaranteeing the attainment of Buddhahood.²⁰

The offering of the body in *Mappō* must be continuous, aligning with the concept of the eternal Buddha's constant effort to save others. *Shikidoku* is a perpetual state of offering, transforming negative external circumstances into the internal fuel necessary for awakening.

V. The Wonderful Dharma (Myōhō) as the Substance of the Offering

A. The Essence of the Myōhō-Renge-Kyō

The ultimate substance of the perfect offering in Nichiren Buddhism is the recitation of the *Daimoku, Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*.²¹ This phrase literally means "I take refuge in the Lotus of the Wonderful Law".²¹

Myōhō (Wonderful Dharma) is the key component, referring to ultimate reality itself, or Suchness, which perfectly integrates all phenomena.²² The essence of the

Lotus Sūtra is thus condensed into this phrase, signifying the ultimate Law and true entity of life permeating the universe.²³

The character *Myō* (Wonderful or Mystic) carries a profound functional meaning; it is not merely descriptive but actively possesses the power to "revive, that is, to return to life" and to "cure the dead as well as the living".²⁴ Given that Medicine-King Bodhisattva had initially vowed to cure illness¹², Nichiren established that the ultimate medicine is the Law itself. The bodily offering is replaced by the recitation of this ultimate medicine (

Myōhō-renge-kyō), which possesses the power to awaken the Buddha nature in all people and heal spiritual and, potentially, physical ills.²⁴

B. The Embodied Reality: *Ichinen Sanzen*

The philosophical underpinning that validates the body and mind as the ultimate offering is the principle of *Ichinen Sanzen* (Three Thousand Realms in a Single Thought-Moment).² This principle asserts that the smallest unit of life—a single thought—contains and encompasses the entire cosmos, demonstrating the mutual interpenetration of all phenomena, from hell-dwellers up through Buddhas.²

Because the cosmic truth resides within the "invisible heart" ²⁶, the inner determination (*ichinen*) of the individual practitioner to practice the *Myōhō* becomes paramount. The heart's subtle difference in attitude—approaching challenges with appreciation versus complaint—is taught by the doctrine of *Ichinen Sanzen* to cause a massive difference in one's life.²⁶ This focus on the internal commitment confirms that the ultimate offering is one of spiritual resolve rather than external physical action.

Nichiren emphasized that the *Lotus Sūtra* is unique because it was "preached in accordance with the Buddha's own mind," unlike provisional sutras which were preached in accordance with the minds of others.⁹ When a practitioner embodies the

Myōhō by chanting the *Daimoku*, their subjective life (the body and mind) is forced to align with the ultimate objective reality (the Buddha's wisdom). This process automatically confers immeasurable benefit, even if the practitioner does not fully grasp the meaning, akin to mugwort that grows straight when placed in the midst of hemp.⁹

C. Transforming Defilements into Enlightenment (Bonnō Soku Bodai)

Through the practice of *Daimoku*, practitioners realize the principle of "defilements as awakening, and birth and death as nirvāna".²⁷ This Mahāyāna teaching asserts that suffering, desire, and confusion (

bonnō) are not obstacles to be cut off, but are intrinsically unified with awakening (*bodai*).²⁷

Reading the Sūtra with one's body thus means recognizing that all phenomena, including the suffering and challenges inherent in physical life, are themselves manifestations of *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*.²⁷ This realization is the wisdom of the Buddha and provides ultimate value to the present existence.² The perfect offering is therefore a life that actively uses its defilements and difficulties as the catalyst for enlightenment.

The relationship between hardship and the ultimate truth is summarized below:

Doctrinal Equivalence: Hardship and the Wonderful Dharma

| Conceptual Element | Nichiren's Interpretation | Soteriological Value (Myōhō Connection) |
|--------------------|---------------------------|---|
|--------------------|---------------------------|---|

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Hardship/Suffering | <i>Shikidoku</i> (Reading with the Body) | Necessary evidence to prove the Sūtra's validity; transforms karma ⁵ |
| The Physical Body | The Locus of <i>Ichinen Sanzen</i> (The Treasure Tower) | The vehicle for realizing the Mystic Law (Myōhō-rence-kyō) ² |
| The Essence of the Sūtra | <i>Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō</i> (The Daimoku) | The ultimate Law and the "good medicine" for the ills of humanity ²¹ |
| Motivation | Profound Gratitude and Unwavering Will ²⁶ | Multiplies good fortune; ensures prayers are answered; aligns the heart with the Buddha's wisdom ²⁶ |

VI. The Practical Outcome: Dedication, Gratitude, and Kosen-Rufu

A. Gratitude as the Foundation of the Offering

In Nichiren Buddhism, the perfect offering is rooted in the mental state of profound gratitude (*shion*).²⁶ Gratitude is defined as the foundation of everything in Buddhism, possessing the power to multiply good fortune and ensure that prayers are answered.²⁶

Nichiren stressed the importance of repaying the "four debts of gratitude": those owed to parents, teachers, the country or society, and all living beings.²⁸ The highest means of repaying this gratitude is not through external ritual or isolated physical acts, but through continuous dedication to Buddhist practice and striving for the enlightenment and well-being of others.²⁹ By studying Buddhism and becoming a "person of wisdom," one truly fulfills this duty.²⁹

B. The Contemporary Perfect Offering: Practice for Self and Others

The modern manifestation of the perfect offering is the continuous, dual practice designed to achieve *kosen-rufu*—the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law to bring about peace in society and nature.³⁰

The practical offering entails two complementary aspects: practice for oneself (chanting *Daimoku* and reciting portions of the Sūtra) and practice for others (sharing the teaching and encouraging fellow practitioners).³⁰ This unwavering commitment to both internal transformation and external compassion fulfills the foundational Bodhisattva Vow.

The inner determination triggered by consistent practice leads to *human revolution* (inner transformation), which subsequently triggers a positive response in the environment.³¹ This localized, ongoing change in the practitioner's life and immediate surroundings is the practical manifestation of the universal illumination achieved by Gladly-Seen's self-sacrifice.³ Where the Bodhisattva's body illuminated the universe physically, the practitioner's life, transformed by

Myōhō, illuminates the present world through resilience and compassionate action.

C. Conclusion: The Illumination of the Present Moment

The transition from the literal, miraculous self-immolation of Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva to the embodied resilience (*shikidoku*) demanded by Nichiren marks a critical moment in Mahāyāna soteriology. This shift redefines the perfect offering, moving it from the realm of the transcendent and impossible to the immanent and universally accessible.

Nichiren's teaching confirms that the body is not an object to be destroyed for spiritual gain, but the irreplaceable and most precious medium through which the ultimate reality (*Myōhō*) must be realized.² The body, by suffering for the sake of the Law, becomes the enduring text that validates the Buddha's wisdom.

This path of *shikidoku* rejects the passivity of nihilism and instead demands active, resilient joy.³² The perfect offering is a life that demonstrates unshakable conviction in the dignity and infinite potential of the human spirit, even when facing the deepest adversity.³¹ The ultimate spiritual contribution is the commitment to live a grateful and compassionate life, ensuring that the flame of life "burn[s] brightly once again in the heart of someone who is suffering

deeply".²⁰ By transforming internal determination, the practitioner's entire world becomes the living Buddha land, making the offering of one's complete, ordinary life the highest and most valuable act of dedication.

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